

The Brownstone Era

Righter's Quarry at the corner of Mt. Prospect and Bloomfield avenues from an old photograph in the Newark Museum collection. The oxen helped pull the stone up the sharp incline to street level. Site was filled in around 1894 for business buildings.

Homes of Distinction and Public Buildings of 19th Century Were Built with 'Fashionable' Stone from City's Almost Forgotten Quarries

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AT the corner of Bloomfield and Clifton avenues, Newark, laborers have been tearing away the front part of a small church to make room for the widening of Bloomfield avenue. The church is of brick, but the fill under it, revealed by the demolition, is of chunks of red sandstone in varying shapes and sizes, a mute reminder of the brownstone quarries of the 19th Century.

The only other evidence of the quarries remaining today is in the name of Stone street in the First Ward, but a century ago Newark had at least five stone quarries in what is now a thickly settled area. The Newark quarries were well known as early as 1806 when the famous "Shoemaker Map had "The Quarries" printed on its upper right hand corner north of the Mill Brook, and quite a little to the west of the upper end of High street, originally called Quarry road.

In the late 1700s, according to Edward S. Rankin, there was a quarry at the southwest corner of Orange and High streets, from which the stone was taken for Old First Church, built in 1787, and Trinity Church, in 1809. On the site of this quarry Morton's brewery was later erected, using the deep excavation for its ale vault. This was Newark's first commercial brewery, torn down many years ago.

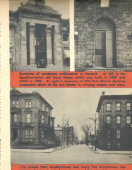
SOMEWHAT further west, and on the north side of Orange street, about opposite Jay street, was another ancient quarry, worked before 1800, for its excavation was used as a reservoir when Newark's first water supply system was developed before 1811. The road leading from Broad street near the Stone Bridge to Orange street at that point was known by 1836 as Quarry street. This was renamed Eighth avenue in 1867.

Between Quarry street and Bloomfield avenue other Newark quarries were opened during the 19th Century. Stone had already been taken from the brownstone outcroppings along Mill Brook to build the Stone Bridge across Broad street, another bridge by the old mill at High street, the Stone Dock on the Passaic near Clay street, and the Plume homestead, now the rectory of the House of Prayer.

According to the 1881 annual report of the state geologist, Professor George Cook, the quarry south of Bloomfield avenue, about where Mt. Prospect avenue now runs, was one of the oldest in New Jersey, having been worked more than 70 years. Originally known as the Old Crane Quarry, it was on land owned by Israel Crane. Crane, a farmer, was a large land owner who leased a big tract near the quarry to the New Jersey State Fair in 1856. The working face of the quarry was 400 feet long in 1881, running north to south.

As the excavation went further and further west, the cavity to the east was filled in with the strippings of shale which had covered the deep beds of dark red sandstone. Thus the fill made a place for the development of building lots, badly needed in the growing city. The Newark Quarry Company whose workings were here lasted until about 1895, when the

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Examples of sandstone architecture in Newark. At left is the Egyptian-styled old Court House which was built in 1837 and razed in 1906. At right is doorway of Old First Church showing decorative effect of the red blocks in varying shapes and sizes.

[illegible] Lincoln Park neighborhood had many fine brownstone residences of types shown above at corner of Broad and Camp streets. [illegible] of ornamental iron railings was common at the time. Even [illegible] Park was surrounded by such a railing for many years.



WHEN NEWARK WAS YOUNGER

Plume House, built early in 1700's, was originally surrounded by farm land. It was in an upper room of the house, which was then and still is rectory of the House of Prayer, that the Rev. Hannibal Goodwin in 1887 invented flexible photographic film.

Few of the thousands who pass 510 Broad street daily know that North Reformed Church was designed by the noted English architect, Upjohn, who also designed New York's Old Trinity. Built in 1857, it had tower and interior restored after a fire in 1931.

The Essex County Jail on Wilsey street was built of red sandstone in 1837, the same year that the old Egyptian style Court House was erected. A building of simple, dignified lines, it is unnoticed by many Newarkers. Note gas lamp and unpaved streets.

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growth of the city closed the quarries along Bloomfield avenue forever.

AN even larger quarry, known as Righter's, was on the northeast side of Bloomfield avenue. The working face here was 700 feet long, and the quarry was a very old one, one of the original Crane Quarries. Opposite it on the west side of Mt. Prospect avenue was W. D. Patterson's quarry opened in 1872. A fourth quarry, operated by Kocher Bros., was between Parker and Ridge streets with Park avenue on the north, and Sixth avenue on the south. This also opened in 1872 and was worked until the 1890s. These four quarries produced in the year 1881 stone estimated to be worth $120,000. During the six years previous they had produced stone bringing a return of $100,000 a year.

Newark was ideally situated for the development of the quarry industry. The workings were only a half-mile from the Passaic River docks, from the main line of the Lackawanna and from the Erie Railroad at Fourth avenue. There was great demand for the native brownstone from Newark builders, from New York, and as far away as New Haven, Princeton and Albany. Along High street, River street and by the Morris Canal there were stone yards where the huge blocks were dressed for market. From them one could buy building stones, brownstone sills and facings, sometimes carved, and brownstone monuments for the cemetery.

ALTHOUGH brownstone houses were built as early as the 1840s, they did not become numerous until the late 60s and 70s, when postwar prosperity brought an era of great ostentation to big cities throughout the nation. In Lippincott's Magazine in 1874 one reads that a brownstone front conferred upon the house owner a mark of social distinction. The rich color, and the soft shadows cast by the dark stone fitted in with the love of carving and ornamentation in the Victorian period. What to us would seem gloomy and monotonous, almost overpowering, pleased and soothed our Victorian ancestors. So fashionable had brownstone become that it was used in 1881 for the Vanderbilt Mansion on Fifth avenue, though the owners could easily have paid for marble construction throughout!

Any one who wishes to know how people of fine taste and comfortable means lived behind the brownstone fronts that lined New York's side streets and much of Newark as well, should visit Theodore Roosevelt's birthplace in Manhattan. Standing on East 20th street near Gramercy Park, it is now a museum. Inside, one may admire the deep red carpets and damask draperies, the furniture of rosewood and satinwood, the many gilt-framed mirrors. In adjoining rooms trophies of T. R.'s African explorations and dashing political cartoons contrast oddly with the shining elegance of his boyhood home.

Many were the well-known public buildings for which the local brownstone was used. Red sandstone from Newark was transported all the way to Boston to build the Second Unitarian Church. The tower of our old Market House over the Morris Canal was of brownstone, as were the walls, bridges and other stone-works required by the canal.

Morris Canal boat tied up at stone dock on the Passaic River.

LONG before brownstone became fashionable, in 1811, it was used for the rear of New York's old City Hall. The front and two sides were of marble. The Hall was considered way up town at the time and the city fathers thought no one would look much at the rear of the building, so it was made of Belleville sandstone to save money. In 1890 they painted it white to resemble the rest of the structure!

Belleville stone later was much in demand, and the quarries on the Passaic, near Avondale, shipped stone all over the East. Newark's first Public Library building on West Park street was of the Belleville stone, and so was the old Post Office and Custom House with the tall tower. Part of the old Corcoran Art Gallery in Washington was of Belleville stone. The mellow charm of "Old Queens," the venerable hall on the Rutgers campus, is largely due to the use of Belleville brownstone when it was built in the 1820s. It was designed by James McComb, architect of New York's City Hall, in the dignified classical style of the early republic.

IT seems strange now that the New Jersey sandstone should be hardly used at all as a building material. Changes in architectural styles and popular taste are responsible and lighter stones are now universally preferred. The skyscraper, too, has had its influence. Stone buildings can hardly be carried above three or four stories in height, for the lower floors have to be so massive to carry the weight that they are cumbersome and ugly.

But chief of the reasons for the closing of the quarries was that they were in thickly settled communities where the land was more valuable for residential use. So Newark's quarries are almost forgotten.